



Waterfowl production areas are paid for with Duck Stamp dollars and managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. North Dakota has more WPAs than any other state.

North Dakota Waterfowl

Fish and Wildlife Service Plays Role from Production to Migration

By Angela Magstadt, Photos by Craig Bihrlé

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service manages ducks and geese throughout the country, but nowhere is this agency's presence more visible than in North Dakota, which has more federal land specifically dedicated to waterfowl production than any other state.

That's not surprising, because according to Fish and Wildlife Service estimates, North Dakota's yearly waterfowl production averages 3.8 million, more than any other state. In addition, North Dakota is an important part of the migration corridor, with an estimated 20 to 25 million ducks passing through the state each fall.

Some 13 species of ducks regularly nest in North Dakota, and another 13 species of ducks and geese join the migration through the state. The reason for these large numbers is that North Dakota is positioned in the middle of the Prairie Pothole Region, which because of its millions of acres of wetlands and associated grasslands, is often referred to as the "duck factory" of North America.

North Dakota is located near the southern end of the primary breeding range, and in the middle of the Central Flyway. The average annual harvest of ducks by hunters in North Dakota, according to the Fish and Wildlife

Service, is among the top six in the nation, with 542,000 ducks bagged in 2004.

Dr. Tom Hutchens, Bismarck, has hunted ducks from coast to coast and in Canada, England, and Central and South America, and says the waterfowl hunting experience in North Dakota is "outstanding" because of its natural location in the Prairie Pothole Region, the state's low population and access to the resource. "Given the resources, North Dakota is clearly my favorite place to hunt," he says. "There are places where you can shoot your gun more, but I still prefer it here. The quality experience is number one."

North Dakota attracts and holds millions of ducks and geese because of its habitat. The Fish and Wildlife Service land is just a small part of the overall picture, but the Service has several programs that also involve willing private landowners.

Following is a summary of the major habitat programs administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in North Dakota.

Waterfowl Production Areas

North Dakota has about 1,100 waterfowl production areas, encompassing more than 260,000 acres, that are owned by the Fish and Wildlife Service. Most of them were purchased from landowners over the past 40-plus years with funds provided by waterfowl hunters through the federal Duck Stamp program and others were donated. All duck, goose and swan hunters age 16 and older are required to purchase a Duck Stamp before waterfowl hunting.

The purposes of WPAs are to provide wetlands for waterfowl to establish territories, and nearby grasslands and aquatic vegetation in which ducks and geese can nest. These

National wildlife refuges provide habitat for more than just ducks and geese. Nonhunters who buy federal Duck Stamps are helping these nongame birds and animals.



Tom Hutchens (left, pictured with former U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Steve Williams), Bismarck, has hunted many places in North America but puts his North Dakota experiences at the top of his list.

areas also serve as habitat for other wildlife, such as grassland songbirds, shorebirds, deer and pheasants. "WPAs are some of the most important habitat in North America," says Lloyd Jones, refuge coordinator at the FWS office in Bismarck.

These areas are open to the public for hunting, fishing and trapping.

National Wildlife Refuges

The Fish and Wildlife Service also owns and manages 13 major national wildlife refuges in North Dakota. Many of these were set up to provide a water supply for areas ravaged by drought in the 1930s. Because many people were concerned about reduced waterfowl populations due to lack of water for habitat, the federal government purchased a great deal of land along rivers or in other areas with impounded water.

In fact, six North Dakota refuges – Des Lacs, Upper Souris, J. Clark Salyer, Lostwood, Arrowwood and Lake Alice – were all added within two months of each other in 1935.

On both refuges and WPAs, Service personnel work to manage habitat to benefit wildlife. Weed control is important because while invasive species and noxious weeds may not affect habitat of some wildlife, it does affect others.

While the Fish and Wildlife Service, as a federal agency, is exempt from a North Dakota state law that requires private landowners to contain their weeds, the Service does its best to control weeds that spread onto refuge and WPA lands. The Service uses biological methods, as well as haying, mowing and herbicides to control weeds on its lands.

Controlled burns provide more robust grass stands which means better wildlife habitat on federal lands. Burns are done to enhance native grasses in an attempt to restore and maintain native prairie and reduce exotic plant species. On average, burns are done every three to five years, and areas that are regularly burned produce more tons of grass per acre. This positively affects ground nesting waterfowl species by creating dense cover for nesting, as well as other wildlife such as deer because of increased forage.

"Results won't be evident during the first year after a burn, but two to three years after, it produces wonderful habitat for ground nesting species," says Jeff Dion, a district fire management officer at Arrowwood National Wildlife Refuge near Pingree in Stutsman County. "Fire is probably the most used tool for habitat management in the Plains states."



National wildlife refuges provide many public use opportunities. Limited hunting is allowed at many refuges and wildlife viewing and interpretive activities are also popular.

Easement Programs

While the Fish and Wildlife Service owns more than 500,000 acres in North Dakota, it is helping to maintain or improve habitat on almost twice that much private land through easement programs.

The Wetland Easement Program involves more than 800,000 acres of private land and is also funded by Duck Stamp purchases. Producers who voluntarily enroll in this program agree not to drain, burn, fill, or level wetlands on their land. Compensation is paid in one lump sum, and landowners retain the right to hay, graze or cultivate these areas when the wetlands are dry. This program is important, because waterfowl pairs depend on wetlands for all phases of the breeding cycle.

The Grassland Easement Program is designed to make sure the state's native grassland remains grassland to maintain cover for wildlife. Through this voluntary program, farmers and ranchers receive a one-time payment for agreeing to preserve their existing grasslands. Producers involved in the program also agree to delay any haying until July 15 so that most birds have enough time

to complete their nesting efforts and get their broods to water.

Much Fish and Wildlife Service work in North Dakota involves Duck Stamp dollars, but the benefits go well beyond ducks and geese. Shorebirds and songbirds also use the wetlands and grasslands contained in wildlife refuges and WPAs and that's why the Service recommends that anyone with an interest in wildlife purchase a Duck Stamp, even if they don't hunt ducks.

"These stamps are available at numerous sporting goods stores and post offices across the nation," says Ron Reynolds, project leader of the Fish and Wildlife Service's Habitat and Population Evaluation Team in Bismarck. "More than 90 percent of the revenue from Duck Stamps is converted directly into conserving wildlife habitat. Few, if any other conservation efforts can match this efficiency."

ANGELA MAGSTADT is a writer/editor in Bismarck and developed this story on behalf of the North Dakota Wildlife Federation, the state's largest organization representing wildlife and conservation clubs.

More than 20 million ducks and geese migrate through North Dakota each year.

